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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

MRS. WHARTON REVERTS TO SHAW¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

It is a good many years since Mr. Bernard Shaw complained, in a famous Dedicatory Epistle to Mr. A. B. Walkley, that "though we have plenty of dramas with heroes and heroines who are in love and must accordingly marry or perish at the end of the play, or about people whose relations with one another have been complicated by the marriage laws, not to mention the looser sort of plays which trade on the tradition that illicit love affairs are at once vicious and delightful, we have no modern English plays in which the natural attraction of the sexes for one another is made the mainspring of the action." Mr. Shaw's lament would scarcely implicate the English-speaking stage of to-day. It is true that when the conformist Briton or American (who can bring himself to discuss matters of sex only in the genteel jargon of journalese) uses the word "betrayed" in connection with the passional relations of men and women, he does not yet follow Mr. Shaw's example and enclose the term in derisively challenging quotation-marks. Nevertheless, in our contemporary Anglo-Saxon theatre, matters are not as they were in 1903. The discussions in *Man and Superman* are to-day a good deal more familiar to our provincial Drama Clubs than are those blameless farces of Mr. Howells upon which our amateur histrions used to wreak themselves in the innocent American 'nineties. But however it may be in the theatre, to the greater part of our commercially engendered fiction the substance of Mr. Shaw's complaint would still apply. Among those wonderful beings who produce the bulk of our nation's fictional provender,

¹ *Summer*, by Edith Wharton. New York : D. Appleton & Co., 1917.

the delusions of a legendary sexual philosophy persistently endure,—as ubiquitous as ragweed, though far more beloved; and for ninety-nine million American readers, Man is still the Pursuer and Woman the Pursued, just as if Mr. Shaw had never been born.

At first blush, for the reader habituated to the conventional novelistic philosophy of sexual experience, Mrs. Wharton's *Summer* will probably suggest familiar satisfactions. But we deem it only fair to warn those moral policemen of American letters whose vigilance may for the moment be diverted by public excitements of another kind that Mrs. Wharton, wearing the most guileless and disarming expression in the world, has in this novel dared to portray an erotic interlude in which Girlhood is exhibited to the reading public as instinctively bent upon fulfilling what Mr. Shaw so long ago called "the woman's need of the man to enable her to carry on Nature's most urgent work," claiming him "by natural right for a purpose that far transcends their mortal personal purposes." Mr. Shaw, in those distant days of nascent theatrical emancipation, observed, you will remember, that men, to "protect themselves against a too aggressive prosecution of the woman's business, have set up a feeble romantic convention that the initiative in sex business must always come from the man"; but that "the pretence is so shallow that even in the theatre, that last sanctuary of unreality, it imposes only on the inexperienced." In that still more impregnable sanctuary of unreality, the Popular Novel,—and also in the sentimental amber of newspaper chronicles,—is preserved the degrading myth of woman's sexual imbecility—a tradition which would make of her (in the imperishable phrase of Dr. Middleton) merely "a fantastical planuncula." Now Mrs. Wharton, whatever her defects of sympathy and her spiritual *lacunæ*, is, as M. Emile Boutroux observed of Pascal, "a singular mixture of passion and geometry." A recognizably malicious fellow-craftswoman of Mrs. Wharton's once characterized her fiction as the product of "an unslaked voluptuary." We need not view Mrs. Wharton in exactly that light to perceive that she is at least extraordinarily sensitive to the vibrations of a passionate mood; and when we take into account her grasp of psychic geometry,—her exquisite perception of spatial relationships and impingements in the emotional field,—we

shall understand why it is that she can give us so veracious and precise and living a picture as her study of Charity Royall's intercourse with Lucius Harney. We shall also understand why, in her notation of this experience, she has necessarily been incapable of recognizing that "feeble romantic convention" which Mr. Shaw so energetically turned out of doors in his classic treatise on Woman as Pursuer and Contriver. Charity Royall is separated by a thousand worlds of origin and impulse and spiritual process from John Tanner's conception of Ann Whitefield; but she is an equally definite refutation of the tradition that Woman is the helpless prey of Man.

The raw materials of this erotic history of Mrs. Wharton's are traditional enough to have produced, in the hands of almost any one of the hucksters of our fictional marketplace, a conventional romance of seduction and betrayal (minus the Shavian quotation-marks), with its inevitable aura of disgraced and heart-broken parents, secret parturition, "a little life unwanted and unloved," and matrimony ultimately enforced to appease an outraged community. Mrs. Wharton has employed this antique mechanism with a bold and free hand, with a fine disdain of its sanctified implications. Charity Royall knew perfectly well what "going with a city fellow" meant—knew that "almost every village could show a victim of the perilous venture." Crouching on the steps of the verandah and looking into the window of Harney's room through the parted sprays of clematis, seeing him brooding there under the lamp, she was aware, "in every pulse of her rigid body, of the welcome his eyes and lips would give her" should she make known her presence. "She suddenly understood what would happen if she went in. It was the thing that *did* happen between young men and girls, and that North Dormer ignored in public and snickered over on the sly. It was what every girl of Charity's class knew about before she left school. It was what had happened to Ally Hawes' sister Julia. . . . Since the day before, she had known exactly what she would feel if Harney should take her in his arms: the melting of palm into palm and mouth on mouth, and the long flame burning her from head to foot." And, fully knowing, eagerly desiring, she invited freely her lover, later on in the little abandoned farmhouse on the mountainside, with its bleached gray walls, its sun-washed empty rooms, its broken dangling gate, its rose-bushes run

wild, and the long shadows of the old environing apple trees stretching their cool fingers over the grass in the evening light. . . . Here she and Harney lived flaming and secret and dream-like hours, "when the only reality was the wondrous unfolding of her new self, the reaching out to the light of all her contracted tendrils. . . . She had always thought of love as something confused and furtive, and he made it as bright and open as the summer air."

Here, and to the end, Mrs. Wharton conducts her tragic chronicle with a grave contempt for the *clichés* of sexual romance. That she chooses to direct the culmination of the tale to an issue that would have enraged Mr. Shaw's John Tanner, constitutes, of course, no lapse on her part from artistic integrity. In an ideal civilization, no doubt,—one governed by intelligence and feeling rather than by conventional sanctions and formulas and taboos,—the gestatory outcome of Charity's passion would have made her a subject for felicitation. In such an ideal civilization, we like to fancy that we should hear John Tanner exhorting some atavistic pharisee . . . "Good Heavens, man, what are you complaining of? . . . Here is a woman who has turned to her highest purpose and greatest function—to increase, multiply and replenish the earth. And instead of admiring her courage and rejoicing in her instinct; instead of crowning the completed womanhood and raising the triumphal strain of 'Unto us a child is born: unto us a son is given,' here you are pulling a long face and looking as ashamed and disgraced as if the girl had committed the vilest of crimes. . . . She is doing the State a service. . . . The whole world really knows, though it dare not say so, . . . that vitality and bravery are the greatest qualities a woman can have, and motherhood her solemn initiation into womanhood; and that the fact of her not being legally married matters not one scrap to her worth."

But Mrs. Wharton, as she might graciously remind us, is not projecting a social Utopia: she is denoting a social condition. And so the history of Charity Royall—a history uttered with beauty and memorable honesty—ends grayly, resignedly, with long anonymous years of kindly and terrible amelioration stretching vacantly before her.

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